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Ain't Marchin' Anymore: GIs Revolt in Vietnam

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I grew up in Western Pennsylvania, in a coal mine/steel mill region. I graduated from high school in '67. At that time, you couldn't really get a job in the mills or mines unless you had a draft exemption. About the only way to get a draft exemption was going to college or getting married. I got lousy jobs, flipping

burgers and that sort of thing, but I didn't have an exemption. A couple of us decided we might as well go in the Army. There was a little of that patriotism and it was the traditional thing anyway. Everybody went in the army, everyone's father and uncle had been in the army. It seemed like the only thing to do, so I went and saw the recruiter and signed up to be a communication specialist. While I was in basic training, I went AWOL and ended up in the Fort Jackson stockade. Shortly after I got sent to the stockade there was a stockade uprising after the guards blew away a couple Black dudes. The MPs came in with gas and dogs. That was an eye opener. Because of where I grew up, I hadn't really known any Black people and didn't know what they were up against. The Army, and this stockade experience, was my first glimpse of what life was like for them.

Eventually I was released from the stockade and sent back to complete basic training. My Company Commander told me that since I had been to the stockade, and now had a "record,"

I probably wouldn't be allowed to keep my MOS (military job category). He said I would have to prove to the government that I was sincere and loved my country. He told me the only way I could prove myself was to volunteer for Vietnam. I said, "OK" and was sent to Fort Gordon, GA for communication school.

One day we came back to the company area from training classes, and on all the bunks were copies of an underground GI newspaper called the Last Harass. The officers were running around trying to snatch them up, but one guy managed to save a copy of it. That copy was passed around through the whole barracks, hand to hand. "Wow," I thought, "this is really cool." After the stockade and basic training, I hated the whole set-up with a passion. The underground paper had an anti-war edge and was definitely anti-military, almost like a union paper would be. And since the officers really hated it, I liked it even more. The paper was my introduction to the underground movement of GIs, but I never really hooked up with it before I got my orders to go to Vietnam.

I arrived in Vietnam right around the Tet holiday, 1969. The first thing I noticed, besides the fact that everyone was nervous about Tet, was that everyone was wearing peace signs. Black Power stuff was everywhere, and everybody seemed to have a FTA ["Fuck The Army"-Ed.]

attitude. I was assigned to a communications unit on a little camp called Long

Than North. At least I wasn't in the infantry, so I figured I didn't have it too bad.

But after about two months, they decided to set up a Security Platoon to do guard duty as the gate guard, tower guard, and to do short range patrols. Every company in our little complex had to provide 4 or 5 people to be part of this Security Platoon. I was the new guy in my unit, so I ended up in the Security Platoon. I didn't know what to expect. I had enlisted and then volunteered for Viet Nam to be a communications specialist, and here I was in this. But the security platoon turned out to be a very loose sort of unit. The Commanding Officer was from S-2, Intelligence, but he never came around. The Sergeant that ran the show was this Black dude named Sugar-Bear. Right after I arrived, Sugar-Bear pulled me aside and said, "Blalock, we ain't here to kill no VC, we're here to fuckin' survive. If you want to be gung-ho, you're gonna die quick." I said "Hey, no problem, man, I ain't gung-ho, I don't even want to do this shit." We got along fine. The security platoon did what we called "Search and Avoid" patrols, instead of "Search and Destroy." When we were supposed to go out on night patrol, we'd go out about a quarter of a mile to this rubber plantation, and hang out there all night. There wasn't much action because generally there was an unofficial truce with the local VC. We didn't mess with them and they didn't mess with us. The only time we even went by the village was when we'd drive the deuce-and-a-half into the ville each morning to pick up the house girls who we had hired to clean our hooches. Each evening we'd drive them home again. Whenever we went by the ville, it was a friendly scene, we'd go by, say "Hi," and we'd split.

I remember one time when Sugar Bear asked me if I knew what imperialism was. I said

"What, you mean Chrysler Imperial?" He just about fell over laughing, but he invited me to join these discussion groups they were having. He was getting the Panther Paper in the mail.

We'd have these discussion groups about the paper, most all the Black guys, and quite a few of the whites too. That's where I learned the accurate spelling of "Amerikkka."

This was about the same time that this other incident occurred. I came in from a night patrol and went into the hooch and flopped down on the bunk. I noticed the house girls were unusually quiet, and one was crying. I thought for a minute one

of the guys had given one of them a bad time or something. I kept asking "What's wrong, what's wrong?" Finally one of

them told me: "Ho Chi Minh died." "So what, he's a communist," I replied. "What's the big deal?" She went into this whole rap. She knew American history better than I did, and she told me how "in the U.S. when you had your revolution against the British imperialists, a third of your population were for the revolution, a third didn't care and about a third backed the British. Here in Vietnam, 75% of the people back the revolution against the imperialists.

Ho Chi Minh is our national leader, everybody loves Ho Chi Minh." She went on to compare the Vietnamese war against imperialist domination to what had gone on in the U.S. against the British. That conversation shocked me. There she was, in our barracks, and she was sympathetic to the revolution and saw it as an anti-imperialist struggle! I knew the VC were all around, but until then I hadn't really known the VC first hand. Here was this woman who shined our boots and did our laundry and all of a sudden I realized that she was who we were supposed to be fighting against. I realized right then that the U.S. was on the wrong side of a terrible war of aggression.

Frag!

In August, '69, we got some new guys in the Security Platoon, burn-outs from the First Cav. I think they were supposed to be on easy duty for a while to try to get themselves back together. I remember one day we went out on patrol. We told them, "Just take it easy, tag along, we're just going into the ville to pick up some stuff." As we're leaving the ville we hear these burn-outs open up. They blew away a bunch of people, couple kids. We all ran back there and immediately a big debate broke out among the other guys. Some thought we ought to kill these assholes right on the spot for what they had done. Maybe we should have, because after that we started getting hit by the VC. But before we could decide, the Commander caught a chopper out into the field-he was so happy to finally be getting a body count. There were 6 or 7 civilians who were killed. But in the report that went from Battalion to Brigade level, they doubled the numbers. It must have kept getting pumped up all the way up the chain of command because by the time the incident was reported in my home town paper, which I got in the mail, the count was two hundred VC killed.

Our side had broken the unofficial truce and now we started getting hit. The guys

wanted to get back to "Search and Avoid." Unfortunately the Brass, from the comfort of their desks, had the scent of blood. Our Company Commander started putting a lot of pressure on us to get some body count. We started getting harassed about our hair, the Black guys were getting harassed about their Black Power symbols and their Afros, and generally life was getting miserable.

After putting up with an awful lot of this constant harassment, the GIs had this big gathering in the bunkers one night. The debate was over whether to frag the Company Commander.

The Brothers were mainly the ones who wanted to waste him. We all hated him, but some people didn't think we ought to kill him. To settle the thing, somebody put forward that maybe we could unite around giving him one more chance, just give him a warning, and everyone generally agreed. Somebody left a grenade on the CO's bunk with a note tied to it,

"Quit fucking with us."

The CO flipped out, and intensified all the shit he was bringing down on us. So about two weeks later, there was another meeting of the GIs in the bunkers. There was even more sentiment to waste the CO, but one guy had worked in a union shop before the service, and he said "Look, we'll give him a final warning," so that's what happened. This time the pin was pulled part way out of the grenade. You give a guy a chance, you bend over backwards, show good faith, and try to be reasonable.

But instead of getting a clue, the CO heaped it on everybody even more, with even more intensified harassment and bullshit. The CO must have thought that the warnings were

coming from the Security Platoon, because all of a sudden there were all these new guys in our Platoon, obviously Military Intelligence. But we were just a small Platoon in the whole place, and we were being real cool, because we weren't the ones anyway. About a week later, the CO opened the door to his hooch and a charge went off and blew him away. For a while after that, everybody was nice to us, everybody was friendly-it was like a fresh breeze blowing in the air. None of us ever figured out who fragged the CO.

GI Strike

The next CO they brought in was a lot slicker than the old one. Everything was going pretty well, but then a guy in our Platoon went to Hawaii for R&R and met his girlfriend there.

When he came back, we were hanging out in the bunkers partying. He walks in and pulls out a full page ad from the New York Times, signed by 1500 active duty GIs denouncing the war, and supporting the big moratorium demonstration that was going to happen. The talk started going around and we all thought it was pretty neat. We started talking about what could we do here to add to the anti-war protest. Finally we decided to use our boot strings as black armbands, and on a certain day we would wear them and refuse to go on patrol. Then one sergeant said, "Let's shut the whole base down, let's not keep this just in our own unit."

We knew guys in the First Cav, and in the Engineers and pretty much all over base. We spread the word around to the other units and when that day happened, it was 100% in my company. The CO was pretty slick though, so rather than make a big deal out of it, when he saw all the black armbands, he said, "Hey, you guys have been working pretty hard, and I'm going to give you guys a break today. You don't have to go on patrol, take a day off." We jumped into a vehicle and drove around to the other units to see how it was going with them.

It was pretty wide spread in the other units too. The guys in the First Air Cav, were pretty much 100%. Even some of the Warrant Officers were wearing the black arm bands. But it had only been partially successful over at the Engineers. As we drove up, their CO was standing in front of the formation, with his pistol out, holding it up to one guy's head, saying that he was going to give the guy a summary court martial right on the spot if anybody didn't go to work that day. The CO said he would charge the guy with mutiny and shoot him on the spot. We could see that only part of the formation was wearing the arm bands, and it looked like the CO was scaring everybody pretty bad. We were pretty bummed out, but then the formation was dismissed and one guy came over to us and said slyly, "Don't worry, nobody around here will work for weeks, we fucked up all the bulldozers!"

But probably the wildest thing that happened that day was the MPs. There was a small MP

detachment-dog handlers. They ran the sound system on base. We didn't even

think of going to them, we figured, "Oh they're MPs," but they got wind of the thing somehow. That morning, instead of playing reveille over the loudspeakers, they played Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner." That's how we woke up, all over the base that morning.

Bringing the War Home

When I got back to the world, I still had a year and a half left before discharge. What I had to show for being in Vietnam was a piece of shrapnel that cut me right above my eye, messed up knees from when a guy landed on them backwards during a mortar attack, and a new and strong understanding of the ugly face of America. The GI anti-war movement was flourishing, and I was glad to join right in. I was determined to bring the war home. We had a GI organization, put out leaflets, underground papers, did all sorts of things to harass the military, pushed real hard on the anti-war stuff, linked up with the local civilian Black rights movement there in Anniston, Alabama, linked up with striking hospital workers locally, and generally used our remaining time in the military to act on the understandings we had gotten in Nam.

For me the GI movement was a big and very positive thing. All my patriotism was blown away in Vietnam. I loved the rebelliousness of the GI movement. It concentrated the spirit of so many people and really, that spirit carried me for years even after I got out of the service.

Of course, like so many others, I found myself getting a job, having kids and everything that goes with that. But reality has a way of forcing itself back in your face. The images never leave my mind about the war and what we did to people over there. But I always think about how many of us stood up to all that bullshit and helped turn it around, too. That hasn't happened very often in history.

After I got arrested in DC for burning the flag, the press asked my brother was he embarrassed by me burning the flag. My brother says, "Hell no, he wanted to burn a flag from the day he came back from Vietnam. I'm surprised it took him 20 years to decide."

That's where I'm coming from, my experiences. I came back, eyes open very wide. Now I'm saying "enough is enough."